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MALĀ'IKA OR ANGELS IN ISLAM

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I will surely be breaking all rules of courtesy if I introduce myself to you—readers of De*i* Facto—as an angel, an archangel or something of the like. It would be a bit unfair, indeed, to make you assess to what extent the designation of *being an angel* applies to my case. After all, I am a newcomer at the University of Groningen, as a member of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The greatest stumbling block would probably be for me having to make a good argument for not having been commissioned with a message, at least not with a divine one. Angels, or *malā'ika* in Arabic, are held to have the specific talent to communicate God's plans to mankind. My task of providing you with some details about my person and work on Islam, ideally in connection with the theme of the current issue (angels), is undoubtedly far more humbling.

Angels take an important place in Islam that can be seen in the abundant references in the Qur'ān and in Islamic sources to these creatures made of light, believed to have been brought into being before man was created. To be sure, the Qur'ānic revelation was initiated by Jibrīl's (Gabriel's) revelation to an illiterate Muḥammad in the cave of Hirā. "Iqrā", read! he commanded (Qur. 96:1-5). It was also Jibrīl who brought good tidings of ʿĪsā (Jesus) to Maryam (Maria), Jesus being regarded as the second most important prophet after Muḥammad. Because of this Jibrīl has a special consideration in Islam in comparison to other angels such as Mikā'il or Izrāfīl, the angel of death, also called the "Malak al-Mawt". The Malak al-Mawt is nonetheless important as he takes the souls of deceased believers, whereas Munkar and Nakīr write down her or his actions (good and bad) with a view to God's final judgment. And, of course, Iblīs! The fallen angel, the devil, the al-shayṭān, the whisperer (al-waswās), the *jinn* (genius), the one who tempted men and women to turn away from God's path into doom. They are all angels, and many find their homonymous in the Jewish and Christian traditions, in which they are entrusted with similar duties. Islam intimately converses with Judaism and Christianity but it also advances distinctive and polemical interpretations of its own.

A case in point is that of the pre-modern and early-modern Iberian Peninsula, today's Spain and Portugal, where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived close to each other and where they engaged in polemics with each other. Their interreligious disputes, particularly those written by Muslims, have aroused large part of my interest as a researcher in the last years. I have studied how they served as mechanisms for identity construction that contribute to the ethical formation of the believer and the community.

Eschatological preoccupations and messianic expectations figured high on the list of concerns of Iberian Muslims. We often find mentions to angels in the context referred to above but are also used to despise Christian doctrine and practice (Muḥammad was, in turn, depicted by Christians as the seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse) or to rebuke the divine nature of ʿĪsā (Jesus) (because: what were exactly the words in Jibrīl (Gabriel's) annunciation?, Muslims would question). The usefulness of such a polemical imaginary as well as the projection of the self towards a world to come is not surprising when read against the background of political struggle between the two most powerful powers at the time, Christianity and Islam. It is even more appealing to those Muslims whose communities had been absorbed by the growing Christian kingdoms and became religious minorities (the Mudejars). Prophetic expectations and the belief in angels helped them to keep their hopes up. Muslims from the Muslim Kingdom Granada needed hope, too, as they saw how their power in the peninsula was put in check by the Christians and collapsed in 1492. Those Muslims who remained after the victory of the Catholic Monarchs were forced to convert or emigrate. They had to seek subterfuges and practice *taqiyya* (or the concealment of the faith) to maintain their adherence to Islam and to evade the relentless persecution of the Christian society. Nominally, they were Christians (known as Moriscos). The Moriscos faced final expulsion from the peninsula in the first decades of the seventeenth century and their diaspora communities reached North-African coasts but also a number of northern European countries (including The Netherlands) and the Ottoman Empire.

This is a history of intellectual, cultural and religious encounters, of collisions and mutual influence that heads my academic interest and that, in its broadest sense, includes present-day questions related to Muslims and Islam in the West. My current research within my VENI project and as a Rosalind Franklin Fellow at the RuG, focuses on Iberian Islam. I discuss the conditions of Christians and Jews under its rule (al-Andalus). As in the example of angels, we could say here, too, that proper understanding of how religious difference was regulated at the time needs more than drawing parallels between traditions. It requires recognition of the intimate entanglement of these traditions and of the role of Islam in the shaping specific Western modes of thought.